



To: House Education

From: Jay Nichols , Executive Director

Date: January 17, 2023

Subject: Testimony Update Principals

For the record, Jay Nichols, Executive Director Vermont Principals' Association (VPA). We have approximately 800 members with virtually all principals, the vast majority of Assistant Principals, and a number of other school-level leaders serving as members of the VPA.

Our mission is:

The Vermont Principals' Association supports school leaders to improve the equity and quality of educational opportunities for all students.

We are governed by a 15 member Executive Council that includes a Career Center Director, an Assistant Principal, a Retired Principal and 12 active Vermont School Principals.

*** Principal and Assistant Principal turnover in VT last year was 31% - to my knowledge it has never been higher than 22% in a given year. Superintendent turnover was at a similar level. The job has never been harder, never had higher expectations, never had more accountability without corresponding resources.

COVID Recovery Funds:

- The federal funding that came forward to schools in the various pandemic-related relief packages were certainly appreciated and did have a positive impact in many areas. Some schools were able to hire individuals that provided more mental health support, social-emotional learning opportunities and academic recovery personnel to provide multi-tiered support to students.

- Some of these funds were also used to start or increase programming for After School Programs and Summer Enrichment Programming.
- One goal from an economic approach was to use these one-time monies for programs and strategic approaches that could endure beyond when the money runs out. Unfortunately, teaching and learning is a uniquely human social construct. Meaning it is all about high quality staff and faculty providing support to students.
- A major concern that I have is that many people seem to think that things will quickly go back to “normal” whatever that is and that students will be able to make up for all of the instructional time that was lost to closures from COVID and the dysregulation from so many student and staff being absent from school due to illness or contact tracing requirements. This won't be the case. We will be many years trying to overcome any social, emotional, and academic deficiency exacerbated by the Pandemic.
- An enormous concern for school leaders - especially in poorer and more vulnerable school communities is the lack of qualified staff available for students. Substitute teachers are very hard to find. Support staff openings are still in the hundreds of open positions across the state.
- Oftentimes, support staff are pulled from their regular responsibilities to cover a class because otherwise there would be no adult to cover the classroom.
- We even have situations where students are getting behavioral support that is typically provided in person being provided online because we can't find qualified Board Certified Behavioral Analysts (BCBA).
- School leaders can't fill teaching and support positions with qualified people because the people are simply not out there or are taking jobs outside of education that pay much more money and have a lot less stress. We are also losing school principals to the same dynamic.
- The Mental Health crisis that children are facing cannot be overstated. We have children in demonstrated need of mental health services that are not getting it. With basic needs not met for a significantly higher number of students than in the past - one of our larger high schools is looking to develop a specific homeless program in their school because they have so many homeless students attending. The lack of capacity among partners in social and mental health leaves schools essentially functioning as therapeutic centers in some ways for many students who have experienced physical and sexual trauma through the pandemic and are not getting the support they need. Often, these students are coming to school and acting out in extreme maladaptive ways and exhibiting violent behaviors toward others including staff. Students are on wait lists for services and schools are trying to hobble along as best they can. We have never had more staff injuries caused by student violence than we currently do according to the Vermont School Board Insurance Trust. **This is a crisis.**

Things the Legislature could do to help schools:

- Continue to support the bill that allows teachers to come out of retirement to staff hard to staff positions without taking a retirement penalty.

- Provide loan forgiveness for educators that teach in VT for a specified amount of time especially in rural areas and in hard to staff positions.
- Provide school construction/renovation funding - our school buildings across the state are in pretty poor shape. There is research that shows that clean, safe, well lit, and well maintained buildings contribute both to academic learning and student sense of pride and value in their school
- Provide FTE funding(taxing authority) for early childhood in schools that corresponds with the number of hours the students is actually being served - a full day of preschool at a school should count for a full day ADM as it does for a Kindergarten student
- We need Housing and Child Care support - many parents can't work because they can't afford child care and many people can't afford to live in VT. We have lost many teacher candidates simply because they could not find affordable housing near where they were offered a teaching job. Housing and Child Care costs and issues are making it very hard for our key demographic of 19 to 44 year olds to move to VT - we need these people. They usually work and they usually have kids - two things Vermont needs: workers and more children
- Make sure any chemical mitigations that are required to be done for schools have corresponding revenue sources
- Keep the Education Fund as pure as possible. We hear rhetoric all the time about the high per pupil cost of education in Vermont on the one hand but on the other we keep requiring more social and mental health work to be done by schools; we can't have it both ways.
- Provide General Fund support necessary to whatever level is needed to make sure that children and families are getting the mental health support they need - if we don't do that then students can't effectively learn.